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ABSTRACT

Part I of the Learning Climate in Schools evaluation brief looked at violence and disruptive behavior in the North Carolina public schools from several perspectives, including that of teachers expressed in an annual survey. Part II examines teacher perceptions of learning and organizational climates using another set of teacher responses to the end-of-grade and end-of-course (high school) surveys teachers completed in 1995. Survey results show that high school teachers have less positive views about their learning climate and school culture than do teachers in grades three through eight. Agreement with positive items became lower with each successive grade, until no more than half of the high school teachers agreed with any item. In spite of the more frequent problems reported in the middle school grades, middle school teachers reported higher feelings of safety than did high school teachers. It may be that the type of problems at the high school level lead to lower feelings of safety than do the types of problems reported at the middle school grades. Special challenges were noted across all grades in identifying and intervening in student problems early, enforcing discipline consistently and fairly, and providing teacher input into curriculum, teaching, and policy decisions. Differences were also noted in the positive responses of teachers in different subject areas at the high school level. (SLD)

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Public Schools of North Carolina . State Board of Education . Jay Robinson, Chairman
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Learning Climate in Schools: Part II

Teacher Views of the Learning and Organizational Climate in Schools

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Background

Part I of the Learning Climate in Schools brief looked at views of violence and disruptive behavior from several perspectives. The teacher perspective was provided by responses to an item on the teacher header sheet for the 1995 End-of-Grade and End-of-Course Tests. Part II looks at another set of statements on the 1995 header sheet that asked teachers about the learning and organizational climate in their schools.

Learning Climate Item

Teachers were asked to mark any of the following ten statements that they believed were true for their school. Those statements were:

1. The mission and goals of my school are communicated to and agreed upon by all staff.
2. School staff know what is expected of them.
3. This school has high academic standards and staff members have high expectations for all students.
4. Staff members at this school coordinate and cooperate with each other.
5. Parents feel welcome at my school.
6. Teachers have considerable input into decisions about curriculum, teaching, and school policies.
7. Students having trouble are identified and helped before problems become severe.
8. Discipline is enforced consistently and fairly.
9. The main focus of this school is on learning and achievement.
10. This school is a safe place.

These statements were designed to represent key areas of school climate and culture often considered important to student achievement and school improvement in the literature.

Were Teachers Honest?

A few school system personnel raised questions about how honest teachers would be in responding to these items, since teachers could be identified by name through the header sheet. Local staff who called were assured that the Department would only use the data at the state aggregate level and had no interest in looking at

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individual names. In addition, they were encouraged to assure staff in their school(s) that individual responses would not be analyzed. Of course, there is no way to know how this was handled across the state. While some teachers may have felt hesitant to mark negative statements or compelled to mark positive ones, a large bias in response is unlikely. Also, even if the violence statements are somewhat under-rated and the climate statements are over-rated, the pattern or configuration of responses across the entire state is likely accurate. The fact that the pattern of responses to these statements across grades is consistent with administrative reports of actual incidents of violence strengthens that assumption. Similarly, responses to these climate items are in directions that might be expected, thus lending face validity to results.

Results

The percentage of teachers marking each statement is provided for grades 3 through 8 and in high schools for ten End-of-Course Tests: Algebra I, Algebra II, Biology, Chemistry, English I, Geometry, Physics, Physical Science, ELP, and United States History. Percentages are based on the total number of teachers in the testing data base, which should include all teachers for any given grade or subject where students were tested.

Views of the Learning/Organizational Climate in Grades 3-8 *(See Table 1)*

- For all grades, the item with the highest percentage of agreement was "Parents feel welcome in my school." (78.2%; ranging from 68.3% at grade 8 to 85.6% at grade 3).

- Closely following first place were: "The mission and goals are communicated and agreed upon." and "Staff know what is expected of them." (76.4% agreement each).

- Two other items were rated as highly as the items above in grades 3-5; they ranked fourth and fifth in grades 6-8 but with a somewhat lower percentage: "The main focus is on learning and achievement." and "This school is a safe place." (73.6% agreement each for grades 3-8).

- The percentage of agreement with items dropped consistently at each grade level, except for a couple of places where two consecutive grades were essentially the same. The biggest drop occurred between fifth and sixth grades, indicating a change in perceptions between elementary and middle school teachers.

- The lowest rated item across all grades was: "Discipline is enforced consistently and fairly." Agreement ranged from 36.6% in grade 8 to 53.3% in grade 3. This item was closely followed at the bottom by "Students having trouble are identified and helped before problems become severe." and "Teachers have considerable input into decisions about curriculum, teaching, and school policies." In fact, all three items were at or below 50% agreement in grades 6-8.

Discussion

The vast majority of teachers in the elementary grades respond positively to statements about the learning and organizational climate in their schools. This positive response decreases with each grade up to grade 8. However, even in grade 8 the majority of teachers agreed with most items *except* having input into decisions (44.5%), enforcing discipline consistently and fairly (36.6%), and identifying and helping students who are in trouble early (43.2%).

The largest decrease between grades occurs between the fifth and sixth grades, indicating less positive responses among middle school teachers. This trend is consistent with the findings in the Learning Climate: Part I Brief (Views of Violence) where middle school teachers had the highest ratings of problems with disruptive and violent behavior among all grades. Even so, the majority (roughly two-thirds) of middle school teachers believed their school was a safe place. However, that leaves a third who believe the school is not safe.

Views of the Learning/Organizational Climate in High School

High school teacher ratings are shown for courses tested by End-of-Course Tests and for total responses. Teachers are included only once, even if they taught more than one section of a given course. (*See Table 2*)

- Slightly more than half (55%) of high school teachers agreed with the top rated item: "Staff know what is expected."

- Approximately half of the teachers agreed with "Mission/goals are communicated and agreed upon" (52.1%) and "Parents feel welcome" (49.3%).

- Only about one-third of respondents agreed that "Teachers have considerable input" (35.9%) and that "Students having problems are identified early" (33.2%).

- Only about one-fourth of high school teachers (28.6%) agreed with the lowest rated item: "Discipline is enforced consistently and fairly."

- When percentages of agreement for courses were ranked from high to low for each item, teachers in Algebra I had the highest rank across all items. (*See Table 3*) Because Algebra I is taught in most middle schools, this high ranking may result, at least partially, from the inclusion of middle school teachers in this course. The second highest rank occurred for Algebra 2 teachers on seven items, for English I for three items, and for geometry teachers on one item.

- The lowest rank was held by physical science teachers for all but one item. Chemistry was the lowest rank for one item and the second lowest rank for five items.

- Rankings of other courses were mixed across items. However, Geometry and Biology tended to be in the higher ranks across items, along with Algebra I and II. ELP and United States History were typically in the lower ranks. Physics ranked in the middle ranges of agreement (ranks 3 to 7) across items.

Discussion

No more than about half of the high school teachers in any course agreed with any given statement regarding the learning and organizational climate in their school. Discipline, identifying and intervening in student problems early, and the lack of teacher input appeared to present the biggest challenges to high schools based on these responses.

Teachers in math courses appeared to have the highest percentage of agreement across all statements. Perhaps the focus of the content and types of students in their courses influenced their perceptions; or math departments may be viewed differently or operate differently from other subject matter areas.

Clearly high school physical science teachers are the least positive. However, Chemistry teacher responses also fell frequently in the lower ranks, whereas Biology and Physics teacher responses remained in the middle ranks. Responses of United States History and ELP teachers were also in the lower half of rankings based on agreement. There appears to be some degree of subject matter influence on the agreement with positive statements about the school climate. Some of these courses are optional, and the nature of the subject matter and students choosing specific courses are both factors that may influence the different agreement percentages.

Comparison of High Schools with Grades 3-8

Clearly, high school teachers rated learning and organizational climate items less positively than teachers in elementary and middle grades, with elementary grade teachers (3-5) having the highest ratings. A closer comparison of total responses in lower and higher grades is provided in Table 4. *(See Table 4)*

- The general pattern of response to items in high school was similar to grade 3-8 responses; however the percentage of agreement was considerably lower in high schools across all items.

- Not only was the agreement lower for all items in high school, but the range of percent of agreement from the highest to lowest rated item was somewhat narrower across high school grades (26.4%) than grades 3-8 (32.4%).

- Overall agreement for the highest rated item was only 55% for secondary teachers compared to 78.2% in grades 3-8. However, the top rated item in earlier grades ("Parents feel welcome.") was third in high school.

- The range or spread of percent agreement across grades and courses for *each item* was also lower in high school, indicating somewhat more consistency in agreement among teachers for most items. Most notable were the lowest rated items in high school (items 6,7,8). Teachers were consistent across courses about these low ratings.

Summary

High school teachers clearly have less positive views about their learning climate and school culture than do teachers in grades 3-8. The ratings of elementary teachers are largely positive, while middle grade teachers varied more widely and indicated lower rates of agreement with items than elementary teachers. Further, agreement with items became lower with each successive grade. No more than half of the high school teachers agreed with any item. These findings reinforce the special challenges facing middle schools and, especially, high schools, in continuing to improve their learning climate and school culture.

The lower ratings (less than 50% agreement) by middle grade teachers of statements relating to early identification and intervention for student problems and for enforcing discipline consistently and fairly appears to correspond to their higher perceptions of problems with disruptive and violent behavior noted in the Learning Climate: Part I brief. However, the more positive ratings by middle school than high school teachers about their school being safe does not seem consistent with their higher ratings of disruptive/violent behavior problems in Part I. Perhaps the types of problems rated more highly at high school - possession of drugs and more violent assault - lead to lower feelings of safety than the types of problems noted in middle school grades.

Special challenges appear to exist across all grades in identifying and intervening in student problems early; enforcing discipline consistently and fairly; and in providing teacher input into curriculum, teaching, and policy decisions. The first concern could be addressed immediately by teachers and administrators planning strategies to identify and to address needs of students in trouble at an earlier point in time. As the education system increasingly requires school-level decision making to improve student performance, school and district administrators have considerable progress to make before teachers believe they have input into essential teaching and policy decisions, especially at the high school level.

Schools and districts may want to pursue their own similar (and anonymous) surveys to these issues to better identify where and how they need to improve. High schools also may want to explore differences among subject matter departments. Parent surveys with similar questions may add different perspectives to school improvement initiatives.

Tables for Learning Climate: Part II

Table 1. Percent of Teachers in Grades 3-8 Agreeing with Climate Items:

Learning Climate Items	Grade						Total
	3	4	5	6	7	8	
1. Mission and goals are agreed upon.	82.9	81.6	81.9	73.8	69.0	68.1	76.4
2. Staff knows what is expected of them.	82.1	81.9	80.9	74.3	70.6	67.9	76.4
3. High standards are expected for all students.	77.6	76.1	75.8	64.8	57.2	55.1	68.0
4. Staff coordinate and cooperate with each other.	76.7	74.3	74.2	66.3	62.5	59.4	69.0
5. Parents feel welcome here.	85.6	85.2	83.7	74.6	70.5	68.3	78.2
6. Teachers have input into decisions.	60.8	58.2	57.0	50.7	46.0	44.5	53.0
7. Students in trouble are identified and helped early.	55.3	55.9	54.8	46.4	42.5	43.2	49.8
8. Discipline is enforced consistently and fairly.	53.3	52.5	51.6	42.4	37.4	36.6	45.8
9. Main focus is learning and achievement.	83.2	81.9	79.1	69.9	64.7	61.5	73.6
10. School is a safe place.	83.3	81.5	80.5	69.0	63.7	62.4	73.6

Table 2. Percent of High School Teachers Agreeing with Climate Items

Learning Climate Items	Courses										Total
	Alg. I	Alg. II	Biol.	Chem.	ELP	Eng. I	Geom.	Phys.	Physical Science	US History	
1. Mission and goals are agreed upon.	58.9	56.0	52.8	50.4	48.4	51.8	55.0	50.3	45.6	48.4	52.1
2. Staff knows what is expected of them.	61.9	60.0	55.5	50.9	50.9	56.1	59.6	55.6	46.8	51.2	55.0
3. High standards are expected for all students.	49.3	43.1	41.3	35.9	39.5	43.9	42.8	40.7	35.4	39.7	41.9
4. Staff coordinate and cooperate with each other.	56.7	52.9	47.5	43.6	42.6	48.1	52.8	45.9	39.9	43.5	47.8
5. Parents feel welcome here.	57.5	53.8	47.7	44.9	45.4	51.2	52.0	47.3	41.7	46.1	49.3
6. Teachers have input into decisions.	40.5	40.3	35.6	35.2	32.6	36.9	39.2	35.0	28.2	34.4	35.9
7. Students in trouble are identified and helped early.	38.2	34.3	32.8	30.5	31.3	34.2	34.0	32.5	27.8	32.2	33.2
8. Discipline is enforced consistently and fairly.	32.0	28.5	28.4	26.1	27.9	30.7	28.5	28.7	23.8	27.9	28.6
9. Main focus is learning and achievement.	52.6	46.5	44.7	39.0	42.6	47.6	47.1	45.1	39.8	40.7	45.2
10. This school is a safe place.	56.6	51.0	46.3	46.2	45.7	47.6	53.2	48.1	40.1	47.2	48.5

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Table 3. Rank Order of Courses Across Items from Highest to Lowest Percentage of Agreement

Item #	Ranks (1= High; 10= Low)									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1.	Algebra I	Algebra II	Geometry	Biology	English I	Chemistry	Physics	ELP	US History	Phys. Sci.
2.	Algebra I	Algebra II	Geometry	English I	Biology	Physics	US History	ELP	Chemistry	Phys. Sci.
3.	Algebra I	English I	Algebra II	Geometry	Biology	Physics	US History	ELP	Chemistry	Phys. Sci.
4.	Algebra I	Algebra II	Geometry	Biology	English I	Physics	Chemistry	US History	ELP	Phys. Sci.
5.	Algebra I	Algebra II	Geometry	English I	Biology	Physics	US History	ELP	Chemistry	Phys. Sci.
6.	Algebra I	Algebra II	Geometry	English I	Biology	Chemistry	Physics	US History	ELP	Phys. Sci.
7.	Algebra I	Algebra II	English I	Geometry	Biology	Physics	US History	ELP	Chemistry	Phys. Sci.
8.	Algebra I	English I	Physics	Algebra II	Geometry	Biology	US History	ELP	Chemistry	Phys. Sci.
9.	Algebra I	English I	Geometry	Algebra II	Physics	Biology	ELP	US History	Phys. Sci.	Chemistry
10.	Algebra I	Geometry	Algebra II	Physics	English I	US History	Biology	Chemistry	ELP	Phys. Sci.

Table 4. Total Percentages of Agreement for Teachers in Grades 3-8 Compared to High School

Learning Climate Statements	Total Percent Agreement with Item		Amount of Spread from High to Low Agreement	
	Grades 3-8	High School	Across Grades 3-8	Across High School Courses
1. Mission and goals are agreed upon.	76.4	52.1	14.8	13.3
2. Staff knows what is expected of them.	76.4	55.0	14.2	15.1
3. High standards are expected for all students.	68.0	41.9	22.5	13.9
4. Staff coordinate and cooperate with each other.	69.0	47.8	17.3	16.8
5. Parents feel welcome here.	78.2	49.3	17.3	15.8
6. Teachers have input into decisions.	53.0	35.9	16.3	12.3
7. Students in trouble are identified and helped early.	49.0	33.2	13.4	10.4
8. Discipline is enforced consistently and fairly.	45.8	28.6	16.7	8.2
9. Main focus is learning and achievement.	73.6	45.2	21.7	13.6
10. This school is a safe place.	73.6	48.6	20.9	16.5

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